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Latvia

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Introduction

This collection of country reports is part of the research on Digital Skills, Accommodation and Technological Assistance for Employment, conducted by the European Disability Forum (EDF) with the support of [Google.org](https://www.google.org).

The aim of the study is to explore the situation of persons with disabilities in the open labour market, focusing in particular on the potential of digital skills training and the use of accessible and assistive technologies to foster inclusion in the workplace.

National experts from each EU Member State (with the exception of Luxembourg) and the UK analysed their respective national contexts. They outline policies and programmes to support reasonable accommodation as a Human Resources (HR) procedure, map trends in the use of accessible and assistive technologies in the workplace, and explain the main limitations experienced by employees with disabilities in acquiring accessible or assistive technology that meets their needs. They also analysed the barriers faced by persons with disabilities related to digital skills and highlight some good practices at national level.

The national reports cover the following countries: the UK, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. Luxembourg is the only EU Member State that is not part of the study due to not finding a suitable national expert on the topic.

Glossary

Assistive devices: external devices that are designed, made, or adapted to assist a person to perform a particular task. Many people with disabilities depend on assistive devices to enable them to carry out daily activities and participate actively and productively in community or professional life.

Assistive technology: any item, piece of equipment, service or product system including software that is used to increase, maintain, substitute or improve functional capabilities of persons with disabilities or for, alleviation and compensation of impairments, activity limitations or participation restrictions.

Disability allowance: payments that persons with disabilities can receive from the State to cover basic living costs and services.

Discrimination: any distinction, exclusion or restriction on the basis of one or several grounds (sex, race, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.) that damages or nullifies the recognition, enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field, on an equal basis with others.

European Union (EU): a unique economic and political union between 27 European countries, as it stands at the time of publication of this report.

EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC): a regular cross-sectional and longitudinal sample survey by Eurostat that provides data on income, poverty, social exclusion and living conditions in the European Union.

General Comment: a General Comment is a treaty body's interpretation of human rights treaty provisions, thematic issues or its methods of work. General Comments often seek to clarify the reporting duties of State Parties with respect to certain treaty provisions and suggest approaches to implementing those provisions.

Member State(s) (of the EU): the EU currently consists of 27 countries, also called "Member States". Each Member State is party to the founding treaties of the European Union and is therefore subject to the privileges and obligations of membership. Unlike members of most international organisations, the Member States of the EU are subject to binding laws in exchange for their representation within the common legislative and judicial institutions.

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Number of observations (n): indicates the number of employers each national expert managed to interview.

Open labour market: this refers to work in a mainstream or “regular” employment setting, as opposed to a setting that has been created specifically to employ a specific group of employees, such as persons with disabilities.

Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPD): represent the interests of their members with disabilities and have the mandate to advocate for the realisation of their human rights and lobby for the consideration of their interests.

Percentage points: this term expresses the arithmetic difference of two percentages, whereas percent (%) refers to the rate of change. For example, if Country A has an employment rate of 30% and Country B has an employment rate of 60%, Country B’s employment rate is 30 percentage points higher than Country A’s but is also higher by 100%.

Persons with disabilities: individuals who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

Reasonable accommodation: the necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms. To be “reasonable”, the accommodation cannot impose a disproportionate or undue burden. Denial of reasonable accommodation is a form of discrimination.

The Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI): an index that the European Commission reports between 2014-2022, monitoring Europe’s overall digital performance and tracks the progress of EU countries in their digital competitiveness.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD): an international human rights treaty that reaffirms that all persons with disabilities must enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms. The CRPD clarifies that all persons with disabilities have the right to participate in the civil, political, economic, social and cultural life of the community in the same way as anyone else.

National Overview

National data on the level of education and training for persons with disabilities in digital skills, as well as studies on barriers faced by persons with disabilities regarding digital skills, are not available. Policy planning documents and statistics do not indicate persons with disabilities as a specific target group, adhering instead to the principle of mainstreaming. Consequently, data on persons with disabilities are collected only in isolated cases.

The Digital Transformation Guidelines for 2021-2027 provide general data indicating that in Latvia in 2019, only 43% of the population aged 16–74 had basic digital skills (EU average – 58%), 24% (EU average – 33%) had digital skills above the basic level (with 53% in the age group 16–24 years, 29.8% in the age group 25–54 years, and 5.9% in the age group 55–74 years), and only 24% had high digital skills (EU average – 33%). The highest level of digital skills was in the age group 16-24 years – 75.4%, compared to 51.4% in the age group 25-54 years and 18.1% in the age group 55-74 years. It was also noted that many people are not motivated to engage in training. Furthermore, it was stated that “in the context of digitalisation, full inclusion in society and participation requires digital skills for everyone” and that “adults whose digital skills are at a deficient level and whose current work does not contribute to their acquisition and use should not be left without support for the development of digital skills”¹.

Data from EU-SILC 2019 indicate that the economic activity indicators for persons with disabilities in the age group 20-64 years in Latvia (71.7%) were higher than the average indicators in the EU27 group (62%). Indicators of the economic activity of persons without disabilities and persons with disabilities show that in Latvia, this gap is smaller – 14.20 percentage points against the EU-27 average of 20.50 percentage points. Employment rates for persons with disabilities in Latvia were also higher than the EU-27 average. The employment rate for persons with disabilities in the EU27 was on average 51.3%, compared to 60.8% in Latvia, with some disability in the EU27 average being 58.8% compared to 65.2% in Latvia, and with severe disability, the EU27 average was 29.8%, compared to 35.9% in Latvia². Data from the Ministry of Welfare indicate that the share of persons with disabilities who are registered with the State Social Insurance Agency as working has increased from 25% in 2015 to 26.8% in 2020³.

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OPD representatives rate the activity and employment situation of persons with disabilities as 'bad rather than good', pointing out that the most challenging employment issues are faced by people with intellectual disabilities and very severe disabilities with actual functional impairments. According to OPD representatives, the main obstacles to improving employability include the lack of a state support system for persons with disabilities and employers, the lack of an adapted environment and workplaces, prejudices and stigma regarding the opportunities for persons with disabilities to engage in employment, the relatively low motivation of persons with disabilities to work, and municipal 'benefit traps'.

Digital Skills

According to the DSI 2.0 indicator, in 2021, the percentage of individuals with basic or above basic digital content creation skills (aged 16-74) in Latvia (63.7%) was lower than in the EU (66.2%)⁴. Several medium-term policy planning documents have been developed, which do not identify persons with disabilities as a separate target group but refer equally to the digital skills of persons with disabilities. The National Development Plan of Latvia for 2021-2027 highlights the need for digital skills and the introduction of digital solutions to improve the learning environment, the development of society's digital and new technology skills, and adult learning, including in the e-environment. It is planned to increase the accessibility of the state and local government digital environment, promote the use of digital solutions, and increase the digital skills of citizens by improving the electronic identification and secure electronic signing system⁵. Within the framework of the Recovery and Resilience Facility Plan of Latvia for 2021-2026, it is planned to increase the number of people with basic digital skills and the number of people using digital opportunities and e-services to adapt and implement an internationally recognised digital skills assessment tool for determining the digital skill level of the unemployed and job seekers⁶. The Digital Transformation Guidelines for 2021-2027, acknowledging the digital skills gap among the population, provide for developing different levels of digital skills and education⁷. One of the objectives to be achieved is to increase⁸ the number of people with digital skills at least at the basic level from 43% in 2019 to 70% in 2027 and the number of the population with digital skills above the basic level from 24% in 2019 to 47% in 2027, providing support to employed persons, unemployed persons, job seekers and those at risk of unemployment⁹.

According to OPD representatives, the digital skills of persons with disabilities are deficient, as are the opportunities to acquire them. Support for the development of digital skills for persons with disabilities is mainly provided by the State Employment Agency (SEA) – 23 non-formal education programmes for computer science workers (from the basics of programming to the design of digital tools)¹⁰ and the course 'Digital skills and overcoming psychological barriers' for the unemployed with disabilities¹¹ and the Social Integration State Agency (SISA) – obtaining the qualification of information entry operator (continuing education programme or vocational education) or a computer systems technician (continuing education programme or secondary

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education programme)¹². However, OPD representatives emphasised that the knowledge acquired rarely relates to employment. Moreover, the knowledge gained was rated as low and, at times, unusable. As the main improvement, OPD representatives point to the need for a national programme that clearly states the goals, measures to achieve the goals and the necessary resources, including so that educational institutions and associations can purchase newer technologies and software, start training in educational institutions and then provide them in lifelong learning programmes. One of the shortcomings is the lack of a place where, after graduating from the courses, a person with a disability could come, practice, and improve or maintain the acquired knowledge. Technology is becoming more complex and not straightforward, and creating a digital environment creates burdens. It is necessary to think about the end user, considering the type of disability. One of the respondents was very critical of state aid, stating that "... SISA, SEA, and special education institutions, the purpose of which is to provide support to people with disabilities, are 'refinanced'. Employees do something, but there is yet to be an actual contribution. Moreover, no one judges the results of the work."

The information obtained during the interviews indicates a lack of knowledge among the public, persons with disabilities and OPDs about implemented and planned measures in digital transformation. For example, the Digital Guidelines suggest the Erasmus+ programme project 'Digital Competence Development System', launched in 2018, to create an integrated modular framework for the development of basic digital and transversal skills of low-skilled adults in five European countries, including Latvia¹³. However, no OPD representative interviewed was aware of the project or its results.

According to the OPDs, there are few examples of good practice. Two examples were given, one of which was organised by NGOs in a 'bizarre form' training course for 6-8 persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 crisis, starting training by phone until entering the ZOOM or Teams program and then continuing in the appropriate environment. As a second example, a technology space was created in cooperation between two NGOs, where persons with autism spectrum disorders and persons with disabilities can learn new technologies to develop communication and fine motor skills.

Only four employers (20%, n=20) believe that the lack of digital skills is a burden when hiring persons with disabilities because persons with disabilities – employees need to know how to work with numbers and work remotely with

Teams, Zoom and e-mail. Five employers (25%, n=20) indicated that they provide employees with the necessary training programmes related to digital skills. However, all respondents indicated that no particular attention was paid to implementing solutions for acquiring digital skills for employees with disabilities. If necessary, employee training is organised in many enterprises, regardless of disability in the work process.

Assistive Technologies

Section 25 of the Law on Social Services and Social Assistance establishes the right of persons with disabilities to receive state-funded technical aid for personal use in everyday life, including at home and work¹⁴. The list of specific technical aids is indicated in several Cabinet regulations, but they do not single out work aids separately. The list of technical aids includes 225 different items for the prevention of bedsores, various types of prostheses, orthoses, aids for self-care, mobility and household, interior and outdoor furnishings, and alternative communication¹⁵. The list of tiflotechnics and surdotechnics indicates 41 technical aids for persons with visual and hearing disabilities for mobility, communication, environmental improvement, and household¹⁶.

It is possible to receive specific state aid in the field of employment within the framework of the subsidised employment programme provided by the State Employment Agency (SEA). The funding available is up to €1000 for equipping one workplace. Support focuses more on adapting the physical environment according to the occupational therapist's recommendations¹⁷.

According to OPD representatives, the supply of technical aids is insufficient, especially for more advanced technical and technological solutions. As the main limitation, the lack of finances is indicated in many aspects – from simple aids to digital solutions. OPDs and social service providers could not include costs estimates for the purchase of assistive technology in their answers. According to DPO representatives, there is a lack of information, understanding, and good examples in Latvia where assistive technologies have been used or have created jobs. OPD representatives are critical of the range of technological aids available, pointing out that the supply is insufficient and lags behind the achievements of technical progress. In general, OPD representatives had difficulty naming specific potential technological and digital improvements in assistive devices. The need for different IT solutions, software, and innovative accessories, such as health monitors for group apartments, security solutions, call solutions, and others, was pointed out, creating more autonomy for people and a sense of security for others. There is no place (competence centre) in Latvia where it would be possible for persons with disabilities to try out the latest assistive devices, nor for employers to receive the necessary recommendations for adapting the workplace. The competence of specialists (occupational therapists) is weak, often lagging behind real life. The lack of interaction between policy planning documents, legislative constraints, lack of finances and knowledge, public

awareness, and lack of individual and complex services for a person with a disability and employers are indicated as the main shortcomings.

Employers' responses also indicate very general knowledge since enterprises do not have practical experience in equipping workplaces with appropriate technical aids. All respondents stated that they had no information about what type of assistive technologies are used by employees with disabilities. Almost all employers (19 out of 20 respondents) indicated that the company does not have a policy that implements support for the purchase and use of assistive equipment and technologies for employees with disabilities. The provision of assistive technologies in the workplace is a vital issue based on the recommendations of occupational safety specialists or mandatory health checks. The necessary assistive devices are purchased for employees based on their needs; more often, these are ergonomic furniture, for example, adjustable tables, chairs, footrests, special mice, and other equipment for working with a computer or glasses.

Eight respondents (40%, n=20) knew about the public legal framework and public programmes supporting the acquisition of assistive technologies for persons with disabilities, though some did not know the details of receiving support due to their lack of experience. They partly indicated the possibilities for persons with disabilities to receive individual technical aids provided by the Technical Aids Centre and rehabilitation centres of the Latvian Deaf Association and Latvian Blind Society or the support that can be acquired by an employer for workplace adaptation following the opinion of an occupational therapist as part of a subsidised employment programme provided by SEA.

Reasonable Accommodation

Section 7 of the Labour Law stipulates the obligation of the employer to “take measures which, according to the circumstances, are necessary to adapt the working environment, to promote the possibilities of persons with disabilities to establish employment relationships, to fulfil work duties, to be promoted to a position or to be sent to vocational training or further education, insofar as such measures do not impose a disproportionate burden on the employer.”¹⁸ During the questionnaires and interviews, none of the respondents mentioned this principle of equal rights, indicating that even OPDs and employers must familiarise themselves with the existing legal framework.

Employers have only a very general knowledge of reasonable accommodation. Only one respondent (5% n=20) indicated that human resources policy provides reasonable accommodation for employees with disabilities as a standardised procedure, noting that it is part of an occupational safety policy regulated by law and applies to all employees. Generally speaking, these are mandatory health checks and risk management in the workplace. Three respondents (15% n=20) indicated that they had a policy on access to recruitment processes. In contrast, common responses indicated that requirement processes are based on the principle of non-discrimination and are followed by a ban on differential treatment. The personnel selection policy applies to all persons; disability is not explicitly assigned. There are principles on how and where to publish information and how the selection process should be implemented. There are standardised questions; longer interview pauses are offered if necessary. Online interviews have become more frequent, but disability is not the main reason for reasonable accommodation as it is sensitive information. Reasonable accommodation depends on mandatory health checks for occupational diseases and risk assessment in the workplace as part of occupational safety measures and on the needs and position of the employee. More often, these are ergonomic tables and chairs. For all employees, auxiliary equipment, accessible environments for persons with physical disabilities (such as lines on glass doors, special lifts, embossed flooring, acoustic loops), and flexible employment contracts are provided.

The main costs are for the purchase of the necessary equipment, subject to the mandatory health examination or the recommendations of an occupational safety specialist. Respondents found it impossible to tell the exact cost since each piece of equipment is purchased separately, and the prices could vary greatly; ergonomic chairs of €500 and €800 were indicated as the most expensive equipment purchased. Respondents lack specific experience in making

the necessary accommodation and, as a result, in identifying disproportionate burdens. Some employers pointed out that the limit is €1000, while others, especially public authorities, stated that reasonable adjustment depends on the financial resources available, which need to be increased.

About half of the respondents (45% n=20) indicated that they know, and the other half that they are unaware of the public legal framework and state programmes that support the provision of reasonable accommodation in the workplace for employees with disabilities. Even those who know in theory about support possibilities have never applied for such support. Persons with disabilities can individually receive support from a Technical Aids Centre or in the SEA subsidised jobs programme where a limit of €1000 is set for adapting one workplace. It was stated that if the SEA provides support, too much bureaucracy arises—the employer must submit numerous reports to the SEA, which requires additional resources from each entrepreneur who provides a subsidised workplace.

The support that can be received by unemployed persons with disabilities registered in the SEA in the subsidised workplace programme includes:

sign language services for persons with hearing disabilities to ensure contact with the employer, not exceeding 40 hours of direct translation per week; the duration of the service is from one to two months, depending on the work experience and education of the person with a disability.

support person service for persons with mental disorders for 12 months from the work commencement date. The service in the first working week is provided daily for the entire agreed time, from the second to the fifth week every working day, but not more than three hours a day; from the sixth to the ninth week twice a week, but not more than one hour per working day, and from the tenth working week one hour once a week.

occupational therapist consultations for workplace adjustment.

Employers can get the following:

- occupational therapist consultations for workplace adaptation;
- a one-off grant for workplace adaptation (purchase of machinery and equipment, manufacture and purchase, supply and installation of technical aids) up to €1000;

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- a grant to a supervisor of €10 for each day of work management for up to two months (the grant duration depends on the work experience and education of the person with a disability) or up to six months if the employee has mental disorders;
- monthly salary grants for regular working hours, which is not more than one and a half times the amount of the minimum monthly wage or in the amount of the minimum monthly salary, if it is planned to employ the unemployed person with a disability in low-skilled jobs;
- a grant for the payment of compulsory state social insurance contributions in proportion to the share of the salary grant.

If the employer employs a person with a disability part-time, the grant amount is reduced proportionally¹⁹.

According to DPOs, reasonable accommodation is prescribed by Labour Law, but “an employer can choose how much to adjust the work environment, resulting in each employer taking advantage of this option or following this norm at their discretion.” Emphasis is placed on physical environment adaptation. Still, there is no regulation regarding access to information (relevant for people with mental disabilities) and digital needs. In Latvia, there needs to be a sense of reasonable accommodation or a precedent for what it should be. The main challenges are the lack of a national programme to support accessibility development; specialists and specialist knowledge about reasonable accommodation, possible ways, and cost; and a competence centre to evaluate alternative options for physical and information environment adaptation.

The types of required reasonable accommodation depend on the type and severity of the disability. OPD representatives emphasised the need for an adapted physical environment and information using universal design principles. According to OPD representatives, these are various types of technical aids for mobility, accessible, simple information (for persons with mental disabilities), solutions that help maintain contact between the employer and the employee and the support person (supported work programme), accessibility of information for persons with visual and hearing impairments (equipment and technology), technologies that would ensure the use of elements of the ‘smart home’ in the work environment (for example, how the employer could install a work cabinet for a person moving in a wheelchair to open the window with the help of a voice, lock the front door). One of the OPDs emphasised the need to ensure social

accessibility—how a person feels in their workplace and how work colleagues think about this person. Digital technologies, for example, DIGIT pictograms and tablets for communication, should be used. According to OPD representatives, there needs to be more support for digital technologies. There are no strategic documents; there is no real action or activities. People with disabilities are digitally neglected, and digital skills are at very low levels. As potential technological and digital solutions, many target groups see various online and computer hardware solutions that facilitate or help or provide information in a way that is understandable to people with disabilities and those technologies and digital solutions necessary to ensure remote work. Technological solutions have already been developed globally, which are evidence-based and approved, but “have not yet come to Latvia”.

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7. According to the Digital Transformation Guidelines, remote work and education became a reality during the COVID-19 crisis, but at the same time, the crisis highlighted the digital skills gap, creating inequalities. Many citizens and households did not possess a sufficient level of digital skills, hampering their work and learning processes. It was therefore pointed out that jobs and educational institutions must catch up on digitalisation.
8. As a percentage of the total population in the age group 16-74 years.
9. Latvian Cabinet of Ministers (2021a), op. cit., endnote 1.
10. Latvian State Employment Agency (2023a). Bezdarba riskam pakļauto personu apmācība (mūžizglītība) (Training for People at Risk of Unemployment (lifelong learning)). <https://www.nva.gov.lv/lv/bezdarba-riskam-paklauto-personu-apmaciba-muzizglitiba>

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- 18.** Saeima (2002), op. cit., endnote 14.
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